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CAPITOL STUFF

CPYRGHT

By TED LEWIS

Washington, Feb. 26—One of the biggest messes President Johnson inherited when he took over the White House was the bureaucratic dispute here over whether the State Department, the Pentagon or the CIA was most to blame for the fouled-up situation in South Viet Nam.

Johnson has now acted forcefully to clean up the mess. That is the real significance in the virtual ouster of Roger Hilsman as assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern Affairs and the President's establishment of an inter-departmental "task force" designed "to sharpen the focus of handling Viet Nam problems."

It is likely that other heads will roll as the President moves to try to restore order out of the chaotic ruckus within the executive branch. There is no question, for example, that our ambassador to Saigon, Henry Cabot Lodge, has one foot inside the White House doghouse.

There is not much argument either that the President thinks the Defense Department and the Central Intelligence Agency are much less to blame than the State Department. Not Secretary of State Rusk, but lower echelon officials, who, incidentally, were in violent disagreement among themselves over our Viet Nam policy.

The knifing among the agencies entrusted with different phases of our Viet Nam operation has been ugly for months, and it was getting worse rather than better until Johnson moved in this week.

The Pentagon, for example, blamed the State Department for ousting the Diem government last fall before a stronger regime was available to take its place. Hilsman and Undersecretary Averell Harriman were accused of being the chief culprits.

CIA Says State Department Passed Buck

The CIA charged the State Department with trying to pass the buck to the intelligence agency for the collapse of the Diem regime. It was particularly incensed at charges that Viet Nameese troops on its payroll were responsible for the Buddhist pagoda incidents, which precipitated the coup d'etat by the junta of generals last November.

The State Department has been hitting back stealthily with a vengeance. Defense Secretary McNamara was held just as responsible as the State Department for the Diem ouster and the mounting troubles that have occurred since. And McNamara and Gen. Paul Harkins, commander of our 15,500 troops in the beleaguered country, were derided (privately, of course) for being so optimistic about the military situation that they predicted that all of our troops would be home in 1965.

What Johnson wants to do is to extricate the Administration from this confused policy horror. It is a nightmarish situation which has confused the nation and the world over just what our policy is in Southeast Asia. Incidentally, it has bred deep-seated uncertainties among our emissaries in South Viet Nam about just what constitutes this government's policy.



Roger Hilsman
He was pushed

CPYRGHT A Charged Atmosphere in Saigon

One result in Saigon has been a charged atmosphere involving Ambassador Lodge, the military and our spy boys in the CIA.

The significance of Defense Secretary McNamara's present "crisis mission" to Saigon is that Johnson wanted him to straighten out that end of the inter-agency feud while the President was repairing the damage done here.

Ostensibly, of course, McNamara was sent to estimate the capabilities of the newest regime, that of Gen Nguyen Khanh, who took over the government three weeks ago. Whether, for example, Khanh was sufficiently in charge to mount guerrilla action against Communist North Viet Nam.

But actually McNamara's aim is to get Lodge, Gen. Harkins and their CIA counterpart in line. He will, of course, come back with an optimistic report on the military situation for public consumption, but it should be taken with a grain of salt.

Last September McNamara came back from a Kennedy mission to Saigon with his controversial estimate that our military could gradually pull out and be all out by the end of 1965. He has stood by that prediction since. But he should not be criticized, as he has been, for making it.

McNamara's Prediction of Pullout Fades

As a savvy high-level Administration official pointed out today: "We can't announce we are losing the war in Viet Nam. For morale reasons we have to express optimism."

McNamara, incidentally, disclosed at closed-door hearings of the House Armed Services Committee just two weeks ago that he really took a most realistic view of the Viet Nam situation.

"I don't think we should underestimate the difficulties we face in the future in South Viet Nam," he said. "But neither do I feel that means we should retain all of our existing personnel there."

"I think that would be a waste of our personnel. I think it would give the South Viet Nameese a crutch to lean on that in the end would weaken them rather than strengthen them. They will be strong only if they develop the capabilities to carry on this war themselves. This is what we have told their political and military leaders. I don't believe we should leave one American there longer than is necessary for him to help develop that capability. Now, how long it will take them to do so, I don't know."

This kind of statement certainly didn't indicate that McNamara favored extension of the war to North Viet Nam with the obvious commitment of more of our armed forces.

In this connection he was asked this significant question: "If the Viet Nameese war goes very badly, do you contemplate another Korean war from our point of view, our pouring in hundreds of thousands of troops?"

McNamara's answer was: "No, sir."

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